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HENRY EVANS AND NEGRO METHODISM

BY STEPHEN B. WEEKS

WITH its strong appeal to the emotions and its emphasis on experience, Methodism has always been popular among Negroes. Indeed, among Southern Negroes the Methodists and the Baptists, who represent an essentially similar type of religious life, are in a very large majority, and to one of this race the whole Methodist organization in Fayetteville, N. C., traces its origin.

The first preacher and teacher of Methodism in that town was Henry Evans, a Negro. We know very little of the life of this early preacher, and almost all that we do know with certainty comes from the autobiography of Rev. William Capers, bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, who was the preacher in charge of the Methodist congregation in Fayetteville at the time of the death of Evans. Another source of some information is the autobiography of Rev. James Jenkins, a traveling Methodist preacher of the Carolinas who visited him in 1802.

Bishop Capers introduces his story of Henry Evans in an unusual way:

"But the most remarkable man in Fayetteville when I went there, and who died during my stay, was a Negro by the name of Henry Evans. I say the most remarkable in view of his class; and I call him Negro with unfeigned respect. He was of that race without any admixture of another. The name simply designates the race and it is vulgar to regard it with opprobrium. I have known and loved and honored not a few Negroes in my life, who were probably as pure of heart as Evans, or anybody else. Such were my old friends, Castile Selby and John Boquet of Charleston, Will Campbell and Harry Myrick of Wilmington, York Cohen of Savannah, and others I might name. These I might call remarkable for their goodness. But I use the word in a broader sense for Henry Evans, who was confessedly the father of the Methodist church, white and black, in Fayetteville, and the best preacher of his time in that quarter; and who was so remarkable as to have become the greatest curiosity of the town, insomuch that distinguished visitors hardly felt that they might pass a Sunday in Fayetteville without hearing him preach."

It is said that Evans was born in Virginia of free parents, and as he was "almost too feeble to stand" at the time of his death in 1810 we may perhaps safely carry back the date of his birth to 1730 or 1735. He became a Christian and a Methodist when quite young and was licensed to preach in Virginia. There is a report also that he removed from Virginia to the neighborhood of Doub's Chapel in what was then Stokes, now Forsyth County, North Carolina, and while there was also licensed to preach. He stayed there about a year, but being a shoemaker by trade and thinking to improve his financial condition, he determined to remove to Charleston, South Carolina. It was while on his way southward from Stokes that he was detained for a few days in Fayetteville. Here, like St. Paul, his spirit was stirred within him "at perceiving that the people of his race in that town were wholly given to profanity and lewdness, never hearing preaching of any denomination, and living emphatically without hope and without God in the world."

Bishop Capers then continues his narrative as follows :

"This determined him to stop in Fayetteville; and he began to preach to the Negroes, with great effect. The town council interfered, and nothing in his power could prevail with them to permit him to preach. He then withdrew to the sandhills outside of the town, and held meetings in the woods, changing his appointments from place to place. No law was violated, while the council was effectually eluded; and so the opposition passed into the hands of the mob. These he worried out by changing his appointments, so that when they went to work their will upon him he was preaching somewhere else. Meanwhile, whatever the most honest purpose of a simple heart could do to reconcile his enemies was employed by him for that end. He eluded no one in private but sought opportunities to explain himself; avowed the purity of his intentions, and even begged to be subjected to the scrutiny of any surveillance that might be thought proper to prove his inoffensiveness.

"Happily for him and the cause of religion, his honest countenance and earnest pleadings were soon powerfully seconded by the fruits of his labors. One after another began to suspect their servants of attending his preaching, not because they were made worse, but wonderfully better. The effect on the public morals of the Negroes, too, began to be seen, particularly as regarded drunkenness and their habits on Sunday. It was not long before the mob was called off by a change in the current of opinion, and Evans was allowed to preach in town. At that time there was not a single church edifice in the city, and but one congregation (Presbyterian) which worshiped in what was called the statehouse, under which was the market; and it was plainly

Evans or nobody to preach to the Negroes. Now, too, not a few mistresses and some masters were brought to think that the preaching which had proved so beneficial to their servants might be good for them also; and the famous Negro preacher had some whites as well as blacks to hear him. Among these were my old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Lumsden, Mrs. Bowen (for many years preceptress of the Female Academy), Mrs. Malsby, and, I think, Mr. and Mrs. Blake. From these the gracious influence spread to others, and a meeting-house was built. It was a frame of wood, weather-boarded only on the outside, without plastering, and about fifty feet long by thirty feet wide."

Unfortunately Bishop Capers gives no dates for these interesting occurrences, but we are able to fix them as antedating 1802, for in that year Rev. James Jenkins visited Fayetteville and writes in his autobiography:

"We had no white society there at that time; I found, however, a small society of colored people, under the care of a colored man by the name of Evans, who preached to them regularly, and no ordinary preacher was he. I visited him every round and encouraged him all I could, and furnished him with a steward's book in which to register whatever might appertain to his office. About this time he leased a lot for seven years and commenced building a church, twenty by thirty feet, out of rough-edged materials. They met the expenses themselves, except \$5, which was given them by a white man. This was the first Methodist church in the place; it was called 'the Negro church.' In a short time it became crowded, and an addition of ten feet was made to it."

In 1803 Mr. Jenkins writes: "Old Sister Malsby, who was then a member of the Presbyterian church, and who, as I was told, had been led out of the public congregation for shouting, asked me if she might come in among the Negroes? This was the first white member we had in the place."

If we turn again to Bishop Capers we will find the result of the step taken by "old Sister Malsby." He says: "Seats, distinctly separated, were at first appropriated to the whites, near the pulpit. But Evans had already become famous, and these seats were insufficient. Indeed, the Negroes seemed likely to lose their preacher, Negro though he was, while the whites, crowded out of their appropriate seats, took possession of those in the rear. Meanwhile Evans had represented to the preacher of Bladen circuit how things were going, and induced him to take his meeting-house into the circuit and constitute a church there. And now there was no longer room for the Negroes in the house when Evans preached; and for the accommodation of both classes, the weather-boards were knocked off and sheds added to the

house on either side, the whites occupying the whole of the original building, and the Negroes those sheds as a part of the same house. Evans's dwelling was a shed at the pulpit end of the church."

Of Evans himself Bishop Capers says: "I have not known many preachers who appeared more conversant with the Scriptures than Evans, or whose conversation was more instructive as to the things of God. He seemed always deeply impressed with the responsibility of his position; and not even our old friend Castile was more remarkable for his humble and deferential deportment towards the whites than Evans was. Nor would he allow any partiality of his friends to induce him to vary in the least degree the line of conduct or the bearing which he had prescribed for himself in this respect. And yet Henry Evans was a Boanerges, and in his duty feared not the face of man."

Of Evans's death, which occurred between June 13 and December 22, 1810, the inclusive dates of Bishop Capers' pastorate in Fayetteville, he has this to say:

"It was my practice to hold a meeting with the blacks in the church directly after morning preaching every Sunday. And on the Sunday before the death of Evans, during this meeting, the little door between his humble shed and the chancel where I stood was opened, and the dying man entered for a last farewell to his people. He was almost too feeble to stand at all, but, supporting himself by the railing of the chancel, he said: 'I have come to say my last word to you. It is this: None but Christ. Three times I have had my life in jeopardy for preaching the gospel to you. Three times I have broken the ice on the edge of the water and swum across the Cape Fear to preach the gospel to you. And now, if in my last hour I could trust to that, or to anything else but Christ crucified, for my salvation, all would be lost and my soul perish forever.' A noble testimony! Worthy not of Evans only, but of St. Paul. His funeral at the church was attended by a greater concourse of persons than had been seen on any funeral occasion before. The whole community appeared to mourn his death, and the universal feeling seemed to be that in honoring the memory of Henry Evans we were paying a tribute to virtue and religion. He was buried under the chancel of the church of which he had been in so remarkable a manner the founder."

Bishop Asbury also bears testimony to the thoroughness of Evans's work. He was at Fayetteville in 1811 and writes in his Journal: "Preached; our house is too small; preached in the afternoon; we must enlarge our house." By January 1814, this desire had probably been attained, for the congregation was then strong enough and the house of worship large enough to entertain the South Carolina Conference and thus, in the case of Henry Evans, were the Scriptures fulfilled, "for his works did follow him."